

Malcolm Knowles is considered the father of adult learning theory. And, as such, he determined that adults like their learning to be delivered or created in accordance with the following principles; adult like their learning to:

1. Be self directed
2. Be problem centered
3. Be collaborative
4. Pull from their experiences
5. Be active

Recently there seems to be a renewed interest in the principles of adult learning theory and how they apply to workplace learners. This series will discuss each one of these principles and how you can model it in your training design or delivery.

This month we focus on: Adults like their learning to be problem centered.

Rarely do adults take on learning for the sake of learning. More often than not, an adult will take on learning in order to solve a problem at hand. If they've been laid off from their job and need to acquire additional skills to make them more employable, an adult will go back to school to learn new skills that will make them more employable. They certainly could have enrolled in those courses when they were employed, but there wasn't a problem or a need at that time. If I have sprung a leak in my bathroom and cannot afford a plumber, I may go online to the Home Depot website, or find a book in the library that teaches me basic plumbing skills that will help to solve my problem. Prior to the leak, I had no need to acquire plumbing skills.

The conundrum for us, in the workplace learning environment, is that very often we have to impose training upon participants who may or may not feel they have a problem. So the key, for us, is to impress upon our adult audiences the real need to attend and acquire the learning. For instance, if your organization is implementing SAP, there is a huge need to learn the software package and how it impacts your department and your individual performance. While a worker would not ordinarily take on that learning process of their own volition, the fact that they won't be able to do their job without the knowledge is indeed a problem. If you are training a sales force and they are really good at finding qualified prospects and getting first appointments, but are terrible at closing the sale – there's a real problem! So while a salesperson might say, "I can't afford to take two days off the road to attend a training class," if you can impress upon them that the training will solve a problem they are encountering in their work life this very moment, they are inclined not only to attend but to be enthusiastic participants.

What about a less skill-based training topic, such as sexual harassment or workplace ethics? I would venture to guess that most employees believe that they don't violate any harassment or ethics guidelines and that they would believe training – at least for themselves – is unnecessary. In this case you may have to expand the definition of "problem" to include examples of other companies that also thought that they were operating without issue and point out the types of signs or ramifications of violations that a company, "just like us," found itself embroiled in.

Very often we start training classes by asking participants what they hope to gain from the training. This is a great process to allow trainees to identify their own needs in terms of the topic and the learning outcome and for us to ensure that we meet those needs (solve those problems) so that our trainees see the value of the information or skills that we are sharing with them.

The key to making training “problem centered” is to account for the trainee’s current work responsibilities or work environment and help them – if they cannot readily identify the “problem” themselves - to see the ramifications of not knowing or being skilled.

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